

Tips for the Individual Oral Commentary

Brad Philpot, a Language and Literature trainer and examiner, offers a few tips for preparing for the IOC that should calm shaky nerves and allow candidates to maximize their performance on the IOC.

1. Students often have difficulty organizing their work since they are not sure to whom they are speaking. Are they speaking to their teacher, the examiner – or just a microphone? Philpot advises students to imagine that they are speaking to an old friend or teacher who has come across a piece of work that students have already studied. In essence, your old friend asks you, “So you’ve already studied this? What makes it unique and how does it work?” Starting off with generalities and “zooming in” on specifics should help with organization. At the same time, Philpot warns not to engage in an informal register.
2. Use the “Big 5” as a basic organizational approach in analyzing the text. However, students should not sound like they are going through a checklist: tick, tick, tick, tick, tick – done!

The BIG 5: There are several questions that you can ask of any text. Here are five major questions that apply to almost all types of texts:

1. **Audience / purpose** - Who does the text target? What does the author wish to achieve through the text?
 2. **Content / theme** - What is literally ‘happening’ in the text? What is it about? What are the main ideas of the text?
 3. **Tone / mood** - How does the text make you and/or the target audience feel? Describe the atmosphere of the text.
 4. **Stylistic devices** - How does the author use language to convey a sentiment or message? What kinds of linguistic tools does he/she employ?
 5. **Structure** - How is the text organized, literally (i.e. layout/formatting)? What kinds of structural elements of a particular text type do you see?
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3. Think of the IOC as an oral essay. As with a written essay, candidates will need to include an introduction and a conclusion. Jan Lowman, an IB examiner, suggests that

students “open the window” to new possibilities by making a connection, i.e., how might this all relate to the bigger picture, how might it relate to contemporary life, how might it relate to you?

4. Talk about literary elements, devices and stylistic devices. Students need to sound like they know what they are talking about. *Explaining WHY authors have employed particular devices is at the heart of the task.*
5. As in a written essay, students should speak in the present tense about the text they are analyzing. While the author may no longer be living, the work is still vibrant and alive today.

More advice:

1. *Don't rush.* You have plenty of time to develop your ideas. Speak about 60% of your normal pace. Slowing down significantly will also keep your nerves under control.
2. *Use ridiculously clear transitions and headlines.* Be crystal clear about what you are doing.
 - “Firstly, I’m going to present an overview of the story before I move on to specific aspects.”
 - “Now that I’ve finished my overview, I’m going to take a look at the context and theme of the piece.”
 - “Another important literary device Faulkner uses to convey the theme is...”
3. *Allot two minutes per topic.* “The Big Five” allows you to spend two minutes on average per area (with a short introduction and conclusion included).

4. *Develop the overview more thoroughly.*

- Spend time on the **audience**:
 - For what social class is this written for? (Hint: what jobs do the characters have? What kind of housing do they have?)
 - For what ages would this story most make sense? (Check the ages of the characters.)
 - For what culture was this written? (Consider the social British elite/upper class in *The Importance of Being Earnest*; rural black US south in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; rural white US south in *As I Lay Dying*.)
- Avoid saying, “The speaker is...”; “The audience is...”; “The occasion is...” You sound formulaic. Cover the main points of SOAPS (Subject, Occasion, Audience Purpose, Speaker) thoroughly but don’t sound like you are ticking off a list.
- The **purpose** should relate back to two or three literary elements
 - Character
 - Theme
 - Conflict
 - Plot
 - Setting
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IOC FAQs

1. *What if I run out of things to say and I don't speak for the full ten minutes?*

You will probably lose points for the first three criteria. You will only demonstrate a superficial understanding of the text (Criterion A), there will be little awareness of the effects and the use of the literary features (Criterion B), and the commentary will likely suffer from a lack of organization (Criterion C). However, as long as you sound reasonably formal and don't get flustered, you should still be able to score reasonable points for your use of language (Criterion D). However, you will have seen most of the texts at some point and will have practiced the IOC several times so that you feel confident going into the final IOC.

2. *What if my mind goes blank?*

Just as in theatre, the show must go on. Although teachers are not allowed to help students by asking questions or instigating discussions, in extreme circumstances they can give small prompts or encouragement. If you panic, your teacher will ask you to take a deep breath, take a few seconds to collect your thoughts, and read out part of the extract so you get used to hearing your own voice and to get you talking. It is likely at this point that you will find something to speak about during the text. Again, if you have paid reasonable attention throughout the study of Part 4 texts, you should have no difficulty in finding plenty to say.

3. *What if there is an interruption?*

No matter what happens, the recording will continue for the full duration of the commentary and will not be paused or switched off until the allotted time is up. Even if someone walks into the room with an urgent message, the recording will continue. If an interruption occurs, remember the World War Two adage of "Keep calm and carry on!" Take a few seconds to collect your thoughts and continue. Your teacher will probably mention on the recording that there was an interruption so that the moderator is aware that you simply didn't go blank. This will not affect the result of the assessment.

4. *What is my teacher's role?*

The teacher is not allowed to steer the commentary in any direction or influence your response. The teacher's role is to be a sympathetic listener, to take notes and to assess. At the end of your 10 minute talk, the teacher will ask you two additional questions related to topics you have already covered, allowing you to go a bit deeper with the material.

5. *Is it fair to grade SL and HL students on the same criteria?*

It seems counter-intuitive to grade SL and HL students according to the same criteria. After all, on Papers 1 and 2, there are different criteria. The answer comes in the grade boundaries. The task is worth 30 IB points. SL students do not need to score as many points as an HL student to earn the same grade out of 7. For example, an SL student might earn a score of 12/30 for the IOC and receive a 4. However, an HL student might earn a 3 for the same score. Simply put, the expectations for HL students are higher.

6. *When will I find out my grade?*

You will be able to see your grade the day after you complete your IOC.

7. *What happens to the recordings?*

Some (but not all) of the recordings are sent to the IB for moderation. The teacher chooses the IOCs with the highest and lowest scores plus a selection of other commentaries that are randomly requested by the IB. The IB moderator may increase or decrease the marks that the student has been awarded. Occasionally, moderators may ask for all the recordings of an entire class to be sent if the sample appears to have been graded too harshly or leniently.

8. *How does this affect my final IB English grade?*

The IOC is worth 15% of your overall English grade. However, it is also used to moderate the grade of your FOA (also worth 15%). If the examiner decides that a teacher has been too lenient in grading, then the examiner will moderate the IOC grade down – *but also the grade of the FOA!* (Similarly, if the teacher has been too stingy with points, the examiner may moderate both the FOA and the IOC upwards.) Thus, it is imperative that you give your best effort and best analysis on the IOC, as it will affect 30% of your overall grade. This could mean the difference between a 4 and a 5 or a 5 and a 6 as your final English grade.